

# Be Ye Angry And Sin Not

**BY OVERTON SACKSTEDER**



**A ROODCROFT PAPER**

Holy Cross Publications

West Park, N. Y.

This paper was first printed as an article  
in the October, 1959, issue of  
HOLY CROSS MAGAZINE

## BE YE ANGRY AND SIN NOT

We are told today that if we are to be mentally healthy we must express our angers, that to suppress them into the unconscious is dangerous because they come out in unknown ways which devastate our personal relationships, upset our work or family life, and trouble our minds with unaccountable fears. Modern psychiatrists tell us that the direct expression of anger is healthy and its suppression unhealthy. This theory is a source of considerable confusion to catholic Christians who have always been taught that anger is one of the seven deadly sins and self-control a virtue to strive for. But both points of view are true when properly understood, and can help establish mental and spiritual health in the Christian soul. The confusion comes because the Christian sees God as the source of all truth, while the true scientist is only concerned with what truth his limited tools uncover. Since Christian truth contains scientific truth, what medical science has discovered about anger can be expressed in terms of God's revelation.

### WHENCE COMETH ANGER

"Anger is the perversion of the divine gift of indignation against wrong and unrighteousness which God has implanted in every heart, the instinct which will not tolerate or condone evil."<sup>1</sup>

Our capacity to be angry is a gift of God, given us to be used against evil and unrighteousness and we misuse it at our own peril. It is part of the image of God within us, for we share His divine abhorrence of evil. The extra energy which anger produces gives added strength for combating evil. It is to the human system what a passing gear is to an automatic transmission, a source of extra energy in time of emergency.

In fallen man this God-given capacity to anger is perverse and corrupt. Adam, instead of recognizing his anger toward Satan and himself, projects it to Eve and to God when he says, "The woman *whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I did eat.*" It was all God's fault: If God hadn't forced the woman upon him, he would not have been tempted and would not have fallen. How typical this is of blind anger. The saying was that love is blind, but this is not true. Love sees the person as he truly is, as God meant him to be. Anger, once it has been perverted, is like a curtain over the mind. Anger, instead of being the power to eliminate evil, becomes a tool for the production of evil and one of man's deadliest sins. Instead of focusing on the evil, either in another person or in one's own self, anger centers upon the other person and becomes a murderous desire for vengeance, upsetting reason and poisoning the angry person with resent-

ment and hatred. When this anger is expressed directly and violently it brings forth unfortunate and often tragic action. What happens cannot be undone, but at least it is soon over and the person returns to reason and, except for the inevitable regrets, relative tranquility.

Much greater damage is done, however, when the anger is left unexpressed. Then it poisons the mind and has a profound effect on thinking. The virtue of self-control is not practiced when we allow evil to go unmentioned. Unexpressed anger is not eliminated, but continues in the mind of the angry person until it comes out in devious, indirect ways. No matter how thick the sugar coating may be, the hostility underneath emerges subtly so that the angry person is often unaware that he is expressing anger. Anger effects the mind as long as it remains, recognized or not. The angers of children toward parents, repressed for years, do great damage to the adult personality, sometimes seriously impairing the individual's function in his world, while such anger directly expressed is soon over and does little permanent damage. Anger unexpressed inevitably explodes, causing violent, sometimes irreparable damage. The direct, uninhibited person is seldom responsible for the violent crimes we read of in the newspaper. These are the result of the bursting forth of unexpressed angers.

## ANGER AS A SIN

The Church knows that anger breeds sin. High on the list of deadly sins, anger has earned its place of eminence as a source of confusion and error in the human soul. But the deadly sins were spoken of, in their earliest appearances in theology, not as sins but as states of mind—"the hidden motions of the soul out of which all kinds of sin arise."<sup>2</sup> *Corrupted* anger is the parent of suspicions, ingratitude, resentment, mental agitation, rancour, vengeance and murder. It is a fruitful producer of sin.

The confusion comes when we falsely believe that any welling up of the emotion we recognize as anger is sin. We are meant to experience and to use the emotion of indignation toward evil even as our Lord used it against the money changers in the temple.<sup>3</sup> The notion that the Christian is always calm and peaceful, even in the face of dreadful evil is so common that we often suppress our anger and pretend we don't experience it. But this quality that God has given us to use is not meant to be suppressed. We must use it toward the end for which it was given. Ignoring anger does not eliminate it, and suppressing angry feelings does not eliminate the sin. Even unfelt and unexpressed anger can separate the soul from God and make it unable to function.

The difficulty, then, is to distinguish between a healthy

abhorrence of evil and sinful anger. The term "righteous indignation" is to be mightily distrusted because it can cloak a most pernicious and soul destroying type of self righteousness. It was, we may be sure, "righteous indignation" which caused John Calvin to avenge himself by drowning, in the name of God, two rebels who insisted on baptism by total immersion. This was common, ordinary, sinful anger, and there was nothing righteous about it. Calvin simply lacked the security to deal with criticism of his leadership and so was angry at himself. Unable to face his own defect, he vented his anger on those who dared disagree with him and thereby committed murder.

To distinguish between indignations toward an evil action and sinful anger toward the person of another, requires utmost humility. It involves ability to love the person who does the evil as well as hatred of the evil itself. The strength of the love and concern for the evil-doer which must be great enough to overcome the pain from the hurt received. When one is "blazing mad" is no time to argue inwardly, whether one is angry at the sinner or the sin. Habitual Grace, which can only come from a mature development of the capacity to love, is needed here. The object of our faith is "to have in us that mind that was also in Christ Jesus."<sup>4</sup> By growing closer to God we are meant to grow more like him in love and forgiveness. A discussion of this involves the whole development of the

Christian life and cannot properly come here. All we do in our efforts to come closer to God, our worship, prayer life, our study, our self examinations, our confessions, our meditations, help us to succeed in overcoming the sin of anger by developing our capacity to love. However, there is much to be said specifically about overcoming anger, but it has meaning only when there is some growth of the soul in the direction of being more loving.

Before the human soul can be angry and sin not, it must recognize that it is angry. For us, who have had the gentle Jesus, meek and mild concept drilled into us, this takes some doing. We are quite afraid to admit to ourselves that we are angry. Anger must be recognized before it can be handled. To pretend we are not angry doesn't dispel anger. To say to a person, "That's all right. I don't mind," where you really mind terribly is to jeopardize your relationship with that person. One who habitually suppresses his angers often is quite afraid to admit when he is angry because he realizes the terribleness of his emotion if it does break forth. Frightening as this is, it is not as frightening as the alternative, for each anger suppressed is another stick of dynamite for the eventual explosion. The closer you are to the person who is the object of your anger, the greater the necessity for recognizing and expressing your feelings. When husbands and wives are angry and resentful toward each other and fail to recognize it,

they are storing up grave trouble for themselves and for their children. The sooner anger is recognized, the less difficult it is to deal with, and the less permanent are its effects. So the first step in overcoming the sin of anger is to know when we are angry.

Second, we must know with whom and at what we are angry. This is where the devil does his best to confuse us. His masterpiece is the person who is angry at everything and everybody, for the sin of anger has complete control of this soul. Failing this, Satan will direct the anger toward a racial or religious group. The more general and the more diffuse our anger is, the easier it spreads and the safer and less threatening it is for us. It is quite safe for us to vent anger at the Jews or the Pope or the rascals in Washington because it prevents us from facing our anger at our own wife. Old Scratch also diffuses anger by using it as a mask for our fears. A man must really face himself to have humility to admit, "I am afraid." It is much easier to be angry or "righteously indignant" toward those you fear. But few of us are deluded by this diffuse anger. Many, however, are fooled by Satan's trick of making us vengefully and murderously angry at another person. We don't like anything about him, and everything he does annoys us. We are angry at the whole person, apart from anything he may have done to us. If he has not given us reason through his conduct to be angry, we invent

reasons for it. We say that we can't stand so and so, but we don't really know why. But suppose we do know what so and so has done to us, and that it is indeed an evil thing. If the tempter has his way we will be angry at the whole person and hate him for what he has done. If it is a person for whom we care deeply, the hatred will be greater and the desire for revenge the stronger.

We must realize we don't experience an emotion of anger unless there is an evil to trigger it. Whenever we are angry there is always an evil to be recognized on which the anger can be pinpointed. It may be a wrong done to us, so that the anger can vent itself constructively on the elimination of the wrong, rather than on the elimination of the wrong-doer. But things that make us most angry, and that are the hardest to face are the evils within ourselves. We have all recognized times when we have exploded at another person when we are really angry at ourselves. How many children are often spanked because the parent is angry with himself?

It is easy to say that behind every anger there is an evil. It is another thing to find the evil that is causing the anger. We are only too happy to be deluded. Yet, before we can deal with the sin of anger, we must know as definitely as possible the source of our anger. This requires a willingness to think and a considerable amount of illumination from the Holy Spirit. The more accurately we

specify the source of our anger, the more likely we are to eliminate the evil behind it. When this is successful, the evil is eliminated, and the world is better for it. Anger becomes sin, then, when it is directed toward anything other than the specific evil that gave rise to it. The only way to be angry and not sin is to attack the evil itself, and we should not waste any time in doing it. For when St. Paul says, "Be ye angry and sin not," he also adds, "Let not the sun go down on your wrath; neither give place to the devil."<sup>5</sup> Once the evil is discovered, deal with it immediately.

Remember that all men are created in the image of God and are therefore potentially good. There is no such thing as an evil image of God, although there are corrupt images of God who do evil things. Therefore it is impossible to be angry at a person without sinning. We must persist until we discover the particular evil which causes the anger. This may not always be possible in cases of angers long held, and in such cases the evil when it is discovered may have long been eliminated. But still, knowing the source of your anger is a long step toward eliminating it.

Once we discover the source of our anger is an evil within ourselves we have work cut out for us. When we have battered down the barriers against this discovery put up by our own sinful pride and have threaded our way

through the labyrinth of our own rationalization we have done the bulk of it. But there is still the matter of contrition for what we have done and the confession of it before God. When the sin is mortal there is nothing so effective in its elimination as the confession of it before a priest. The authority to bind and loose was entrusted to the Apostolic Ministry by our Lord to be used, and, while it is the most difficult road to forgiveness, it is also the surest. Perhaps anger at the evil within us will furnish us with the drive to take this important step. But whatever means we use to obtain forgiveness, our wrath is vented in the process and sinful anger has not been added to the other evil.

When the evil which causes anger results from the action of someone else, the problem is more difficult. We cannot repent for another, nor can we change the actions of another unless he wills to change. We have no guarantee that the evil which makes us angry can be eliminated because we ourselves will it. The ideal for our behavior can be found in the Sermon on the Mount. "But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also."<sup>6</sup> The common misconception here is that this commits one to a course of ignoring evil and pretending that it doesn't exist. But passive resistance is a more subtle and devastating means of rejection, and resists evil with

another evil. But the meaning here is that we are not meant to add evil to evil, but by positive and involving action of love for the person make ourselves vulnerable to another hurt. We are not meant to ignore evil, but to use a good and loving means to overcome it. And this always subjects us to further injury. The paradox is that we are so concerned with loving the other person that, while we may suffer from repeated evil actions on his part, we are suffering for his sake and this makes our suffering endurable.

Therefore, we are not meant to overlook the evil, but to bring it to the attention of the evil-doer as kindly and charitably as we can. We can certainly say that we hate the thing that he has done, but he must be equally aware of our love and concern for him. All must be done toward eliminating the evil and keeping it from recurring, and nothing must be done in retaliation or repaying evil with evil. Here the virtue of self control is so important. We can express our displeasure, even our anger at the evil in a rational and controlled way. But it must be expressed. We can make it quite clear that we do not mean to tolerate the evil and will take adequate steps to prevent it, but they must be directed toward the evil itself and not toward the person.

This cannot be done without prayer, particularly prayer for the person who has done the evil. And we must

be most careful how we pray. A prayer for God to straighten out this poor fool and to make him do what we want him to do is less than worthless. After all, we cannot be sure that we are righteous and he is evil. In this matter more than almost any other we are subject to confusion and error. Moreover, this kind of prayer is designed to bend God to our will, to give us what we think is right whether it is right or not. We must first pray that God's truth be known and his will be done in the situation. Second, we must pray for the welfare of the other person; that God may protect and prosper him, that he may cure his asthma (if he has it) that he may alleviate his suffering and give him strength to endure his tribulations. Such prayer is most revealing. Sometimes through it we find, to our horror, that we are part of the tribulation being endured by him. Our success in dealing with anger without sin is dependent upon the whole character of our religious life. We are like athletes training for the big game. The disciplines of the faith are our training regime.

1 Hughson, *Spiritual Guidance*, Holy Cross Press, West Park, N. Y.—Page 63.

2 Kirk, *Some Principles of Moral Theology*, Spolleswoode, Ballentyne & Co., Ltd.—London—Page 266.

3 John 2:14-17.

4 Philippians, 2:5.

5 Ephesians 4:26.

6 St. Matthew 5:39.